Swiss Probe Targets Ames Couple; Bank Accounts Frozen

3/12/94

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Swiss Embassy officials said yesterday Aldrich H. and Rosario Ames now are targets of a criminal investigation in that country and that their holdings in three Swiss bank accounts recently were frozen.

Thomas Borer, the embassy's legal counsel, said federal prosecutors are attempting to determine if money from espionage the two are charged with committing wound up in Swiss banks. If so, he said, the Swiss government could file charges.

Although there is little likelihood the United States ever would put the Ameses in Swiss custody, the embassy's news heartened U.S. investigators, who have been seeking the country's cooperation in the spy case.

So far, the FBI has been unable to examine Swiss bank records because Swiss authorities have taken the position that the Ameses' alleged offense is a political crime against the United States. But now that the Swiss are conducting their investigation, some cooperation could occur, Borer said.

Despite the bank freeze, Borer said Swiss authorities probably will not oppose an order from a federal judge in Alexandria requiring the Ameses to transfer their Swiss and other overseas holdings into an account in the United States under the court's control. The judge ordered the money brought back because it could be seized by the United States if the Ameses are convicted here.

FBI officials and U.S. prosecutors have said Aldrich Ames opened three accounts in Switzerland during his three-year tenure with the CIA in Rome, which began in 1986. Since then, the FBI said, Ames and his wife transferred more than $1 million from Swiss accounts to their bank in Virginia. U.S. authorities said Swiss bank records could yield new details about the source of the Ameses' wealth and activities.

At a hearing in U.S. District Court Thursday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark J. Hulkower introduced an excerpt from a 1989 letter to Aldrich Ames, allegedly from Ames's Russian handlers, that suggested ways to deposit large sums of money without suspicion in Switzerland. The letter said the financial issue "demands everyday scrupulous attention and extraordinary care."